

Second Sunday of Lent – Year C
(Mar. 4, 2007)

Transformation in Christ

A number of years ago I saw a film that I want to talk about today. The only problem is I can't remember the name of the film or even who was in it. I think Tom Hanks played the leading role – but I'm not sure. However I do remember what it was about and I want to talk about it because I think it fits what we are doing here today.

It's about a couple who learn that the wife is pregnant and at the same time find out that the husband has terminal cancer. Now the husband is a man with a lot of phobias. He's needlessly afraid of many things. One of them is roller coasters. So in one scene he decides to face his fear of roller-coasters by taking a ride. He sits in the lead car in the front seat next to a twelve-year-old boy. The man's knuckles turn white from grabbing onto the bar in front of him even before the car begins to move. The boy sitting next to him turns to him and asks, "First time, huh?" When the car almost reaches the peak of the first climb, the boy says, "It's more fun if you let go." The car careens downward, the boy joyously reaches upward, but the man holds on even tighter. At the end of the ride the boy jumps out, turns to his seatmate and says, "You can let go now."

Later on in the film, as the man is dying, we see his wife visiting him with their new-born child and then the screen flashes brilliant, blinding white. The husband is seated again in a roller coaster car at the peak of the ride. He joyously lets go and throws his arms upward. It's a moment of liberation, a moment of transformation, even of transfiguration, and it comes in death.

Many of us can, I suspect, appreciate the metaphor of life as a roller-coaster ride. How often though have we managed as yet to let go and throw our arms joyously upward?

Today's readings speak of some profound moments of transformation whether it's Abraham in the first reading or Jesus in the Gospel or those people Paul calls "citizens of heaven" who are waiting to have their lowly bodies transformed into the glorious Body of Christ. Quite a bold thought,

and yet it may well be what the church is asking all of us to think about on this second Sunday of Lent: our transformation in Christ.

Isn't that really why we come here every Sunday? To be transformed, to become the Body of Christ? Just consider what happens. We come here every week. We take our places. We sing, we pray. We stand, we sit, we kneel, we process. Some non-Catholic friends of mine complain that Catholics can't seem to sit still during Mass. But we are not meant to sit still. Our gestures and movement are important. We pray and worship God with our whole selves, with our bodies as well as with our minds and voices. And at that all-important moment when we receive the Eucharist we come forward to receive the Body of Christ and say "Amen" to what we are as St. Augustine tells us.

And if we come with open minds and open hearts, as indeed we must, something happens to us. Something wonderful happens. We may not realize it. It may be happening quietly, in a hidden manner, maybe even secretly, in the depths of our being like seed planted in the ground that grows without our being aware of it. We are being changed. We are being transformed by the God who is present, by the power of the Spirit, into the image of the Son of God.

In the transfiguration story Jesus is talking with Moses and Elijah about what will happen to him in Jerusalem, his death and resurrection. It's what we call the Paschal mystery, the death and resurrection of Jesus. Our own transformation here is about finding our place in that mystery. Where do we fit in with the death and resurrection of Jesus?

In the film I spoke of the man dying of cancer who finds his place in that mystery in his suffering and death, just as Jesus did. And at the moment of his death he sees new life in the child that he and his wife have brought into the world, and as he exits this life he experiences resurrection as he throws his arms into the air and lets go. It's the way he enters into the Paschal mystery.

In the Acts of the Apostles there is a wonderful story about how the early Christian community experienced transformation. They were all gathered in prayer and their prayer was so powerful that it made the walls of the building shake. In that same vein I recently read an author who said that if we really believed in the power of the Spirit and everything that was

going on when we celebrate the Eucharist we would probably come to church wearing crash helmets expecting that same experience of the early church right here, with the walls shaking and the building threatening to collapse at any minute. Well, it's a metaphorical way of saying that prayer can be pretty powerful, and when it is prayer that comes from a reconciled community celebrating the Eucharist and acknowledging our ties to one another as the Body of Christ, finding our place in the Paschal mystery, there's no telling what extraordinary things might happen. Who knows, we might even feel the walls shaking!